

STATEMENT OF REP. EDWARD J. MARKEY (D-MA)
PRESS CONFERENCE ON TERRORIST THREAT TO
NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS
FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 2001

Today we are calling upon the Bush Administration, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and the Congress to take immediate emergency measures to secure our nation's nuclear power plants against the threat of a terrorist attack.

Right now, we know that the nation's 103 currently operating reactors are vulnerable to terrorist attacks. The NRC has acknowledged to me that these reactors were never designed to be able to withstand a hit by a large commercial aircraft, such as a Boeing 757 or 767. We know from an Argonne study performed for the NRC nearly 20 years ago that there are a variety of credible scenarios in which such an aircraft strike could result in a breach of reactor containment and full-scale core meltdown. These scenarios include not only a direct crash into the reactor containment followed by an explosion of the aircraft's fuel, but also a crash into other sensitive areas of the plant, such as control rooms, switching yards, external power sources, and backup diesel generators. In addition, there are also substantial quantities of spent fuel stored at each of these reactor sites, either in spent fuel pools or in dry casks. A successful attack against this highly radioactive waste would also pose a very serious danger to public health and safety. And aircraft attacks are only one possibility. Attacks by truck bombs or by highly-armed and well-trained terrorists are also threats that we must be prepared to defend against. We are here to say that these threats are very real, and they require and immediate and effective responses. Unfortunately, neither the NRC nor the nuclear utilities industry has undertaken adequate protective measures to assure that those who live around these plants are safe.

I believe that three steps are called for to properly respond to this threat.

First, the President should immediately station National Guard units at all operating or decommissioned reactors to beef up security. These units should be armed not only with hand-held weapons, but also with anti-aircraft weapons. Right now, America is in an absurd situation in which we have an armed federal protective force – the United States Coast Guard – defending reactors located along the oceans, the Great Lakes, or other waterways from the threat of a water-based attack. However, the land side of the majority of the nation's 103 reactors has no equivalent protection. So, we have National Guard units defending reactors in Massachusetts, New Jersey, Arizona, and several other states. But defending the "land side" of the reactor with a military force is left to the discretion of the governor of the state where the reactor is located and most have not acted. That must change, and we are calling for the President and Homeland Security Director Governor Ridge to take immediate action to assure that National Guard or other military units are deployed around these reactors during this period of heightened national emergency.

Second, I believe that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the nuclear utilities industry need to abandon their ill-considered opposition to enactment of the Markey-Tauzin-Dingell amendment to mandate a comprehensive new rulemaking to upgrade the regulations governing security at nuclear power plants and transportation of nuclear materials. Earlier this week, the House Energy and Commerce Committee approved this amendment. It would: 1) require NRC to undertake a rulemaking to improve transportation security; 2) direct the President to examine what aspects of the defense of the plants should be the responsibility of the federal government (i.e., the military) and what are the responsibility of the licensees; 3) require the President report on his action plan with respect to the federal responsibilities; 4) require the NRC to undertake a rulemaking to upgrade the DBT; and, 5) codify into law the NRC's Operational Safeguards Response Evaluation program, which carries out force-on-force exercises of nuclear licensee's private guard forces. This amendment should move forward, and hopefully it can be strengthened on the floor or in the Senate by shortening some of the deadlines and assuring that the NRC, not the nuclear industry, takes the lead in testing the industries' private security forces.

Third, I believe that the NRC and FEMA should immediately begin stockpiling potassium iodide sufficient to serve all those who live within a 50 mile radius of each of these facilities. While evacuation and sheltering may still be the most prudent course of action, there is, in fact, a Cipro of nuclear power: it's called Potassium Iodide. In the event of an accidental or deliberate release of radioactive material, Potassium Iodide tablets can save lives if taken shortly before or with 3 or 4 hours after exposure to radioactive iodine.

Radioactive iodine is produced during the normal operation of a nuclear power plant and would be released in vast quantities during a radiological accident or act of sabotage. This bad iodine is harmful because it can cause thyroid cancer or other thyroid diseases--and children are particularly vulnerable. The vast majority of the nearly 1800 known thyroid cancers caused by the Chernobyl accident were diagnosed in children under the age of 14 at the time of the incident who lived more than 30 miles from the site. But a simple and low-cost solution could have prevented up to 90% of these diseases.

The NRC told me a few weeks ago that they were working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to "develop and implement a program to distribute Potassium Iodide" and were "awaiting the issuance of final FDA guidance on dosage". They've been working on this for years! And the FDA issued its draft guidelines in January 2001. January! Where are the final guidelines? Let's stop the bureaucratic foot-dragging and get the Potassium Iodide distributed to the communities that need it.

In this new era of terrorism, in which the threat of an intentional release of radioactivity can no longer be ignored, we should waste no more time studying the problem. The time for delay has ended. The time for action is now.

Thank you.